

Epiphany 4: “The light shines in the darkness.” Baptism, God’s magic.

(A basic line for an Epiphany sermon on baptism.)

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light: John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

We set the stage last week by focusing on God hidden in light inaccessible. Like Moses, we are blinded by the light of his holiness and almightiness. As is written in Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways my ways, say the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways
And my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isa 55:8-9)

“God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.” The Lord is working in ways outside of anything we ask or think. The blinding light of his almightiness drives us away, drives us to the place where he wants to be known, where his will *is revealed*. In the cross and resurrection.

There he broke through sin and death, space and time. He lives today. We can’t see him like we can see each other. We can’t see him in the heavens or in nature, in dreams, or even in “good works.” He is hidden; yet he is living, present, and revealed where he has promised to be: In his Word and sacraments. In light inaccessible but accessible in his Word and sacraments.

Which brings us today to the sacrament of baptism. At the font the Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. What wonders happen here? As Luther writes: Baptism gives eternal life (*Small Catechism* IV/2). Baptism saves. It is done. The wonder of salvation given then and there. Without our decision. Without our works.

This means that baptism is not merely a kick start, or a boost in the right direction. The child is not given the **potential** to be saved. Nor is baptism a dedication of a child to be supplemented years later by the child dedicating himself to Christ. Nor is baptism essentially a welcome-wagon event in which we welcome this child into the church. It is not about us and what we do. To be sure, we the congregation have a role to play in baptism. But it is mostly to stand in awe of what the Lord is here doing.

Whether you have a party on your **birthday**, or mark the day quietly, your **birthday** is a **big deal** because it is the day you were **born** into this world. A day to break into song: “Happy Birthday to you!”

Your baptism is your second birthday. Every Christian has **two birthdays**. The day we were **born** on this earth, and our **baptism**: The day we are **born** again – **born** into heaven.

Even more a day to break into song because whereas your birthday is about this world, baptism is about resurrection, eternity, the world to come: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). The Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. He is living now; he comes in baptism to save the child for eternal life. “Happy Birthday” “Happy second birth-day!” That’s what baptism is. In

baptism we are born again, this time into eternal life. What song shall we sing? How about: "Hark the herald angels sing!" You know the tune. The 3rd verse is perfect for the occasion:

"Hail the heav'n born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!

Life and life to all he brings, Ris'n with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his **glory** by, Born that we no more may die,

Born to raise each child of earth, **Born** to give us **second birth.**"

Hear the echo of John's Gospel in that hymn: "Life and light to all he brings." "Glory." "Second birth." Perfect for Epiphany and for baptism. As in the Gospel of John (1:4, 5, 9, 14): "In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it....The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." As in the hymn: "Born to give us second birth." That's what baptism is about.

Baptism defeats sin, death, and the devil. It is done. Outside of us, in spite of us. "The Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." It blows your mind; how can this be? Eternal life! No more tears, no more crying, and death is no more. Given just like that in his Word and water, here and now, at our baptismal font.

Ephesians 1:13: You have been "**sealed** with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the **guarantee of our inheritance** until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." Baptism saves.

Luther writes: "A Christian life is nothing else than a **daily baptism**, once begun and ever continued" (*Large Catechism* IV:65).

A daily baptism because in this life we never escape being sinners, totally sinners. Daily we are caught in pride and despair. On the one hand, we think too highly of ourselves; we forget that: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Even our best works are riddled with sin. And sometimes the good we support turns out to be evil and *visa versa*. On the other hand, we also fall into despair as the problems in our lives overwhelm us and we lose hope.

The Christian life is a daily baptism. When an infant is baptized, sometimes a church gives a white blanket as a reminder that in baptism we are **clothed in his righteousness**. As the hymn, "My hope is built on nothing less":

"When he shall come with trumpet sound,

Oh, may I then in him be found,

Clothed in his righteousness alone,

Redeemed to stand before the throne.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand:

All other ground is sinking sand."

Luther writes: "Therefore let everybody regard his **baptism** as the **daily garment** which he is to wear all the time." (*LC* IV:84) Every morning we put on the righteousness of Christ. Come what may in the day, we are **clothed in his righteousness**.

In this world we have problems, heartaches, roadblocks, loss, and suffering. Hidden in the mix of good and evil in our lives and our world, the Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. How do we know? Because his will for us is revealed in our baptism. God's magic happens for us in baptism. There at the font the Lord reaches down and saves us for eternity. That's what baptism is about: eternity.

Again, Luther writes: "See what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which **snatches us from the jaws of the devil** and makes us God's own, overcomes and **takes away sin** and **daily strengthens us** until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory." (LC IV:83).

When we baptize a child, we give him **a white blanket** because in baptism one is **clothed in the righteousness of Christ alone**. And, when the child grows up, grows old, and dies, at the funeral, we place **a white pall** over the casket as a sign that he is **clothed in the righteousness of Christ alone**. Baptism saves. It's God's magic. "The Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." Amen.